



The Fayetteville Observer

Our View: Key pipeline questions still need answers

Posted Jul 19, 2017 at 7:03 PM

They turned out in Fayetteville on Tuesday evening and they'll likely be out in force tonight in Rocky Mount. They are the opponents and proponents of the Atlantic Coast Pipeline, the proposed 600-mile link between the gas-producing fracking fields in Pennsylvania and West Virginia and industrial users in West Virginia, Virginia and North Carolina.

The pipeline, which will cut through some scenic and sensitive sections of the Appalachian Mountains, has drawn strong opposition in the northern half of its route, but minimal resistance around here — until recently.

The pipeline's builders — Dominion Resources, Duke Energy, Piedmont Natural Gas and Southern Company Gas — say it will be a boon to industry in an area that is under-served by natural gas lines, quite likely a key to attracting new economic development into areas like Robeson County, which is economically disadvantaged but unable to meet the needs of big manufacturing operations.

The opponents warn of the environmental impact of the pipeline, correctly noting that while natural gas is the cleanest-burning of all the fossil fuels, it is 80 to 100 times more effective at trapping heat — the “greenhouse effect” — than carbon dioxide when it is released into the atmosphere unburned. And plenty of it is released regularly, from fracking operations and from pipeline leaks. And despite the builders' assurances of safety, the reality is that all pipelines leak at some point, and sometimes quite a bit.

The environmental impact includes hundreds of miles of disrupted wetlands, as well as damage to forests and farmland. Land owners along the pipeline's route have resisted selling easements to the utilities, but eminent domain proceedings aren't likely to go the landowners' way. From a government regulatory perspective, getting more energy supplies to this region is in the public interest.

But is it? The opponents say the best choice for industrial development today is to concentrate on renewable energy, which has become competitive in price with fossil fuel-generated electricity and has none of the tradeoffs. They argue, too, that building the pipeline now will guarantee reliance on natural gas for decades to come, long after renewables have become significantly cheaper than fossil fuels.

It doesn't appear realistic to depend fully on alternative energy at this point, because there still isn't enough of it available. But in another decade, the options may be very different.

We've accepted the pipeline builders' assertion that the massive new gas supply — as much as 1.5 billion cubic feet a day — will be good for the local economy, but so far, we've seen no evidence that new economic development is on the way. The principal beneficiary appears to be the pipeline's builders, and especially Duke Energy, which will use the gas to power existing and future power plants. We wish state and federal regulators would push harder to get documentation of the economic benefits that will result from the pipeline, because otherwise it's much more difficult to justify the environmental disruption.

But this is pretty late in the game for major changes in course, with construction of the pipeline beginning as soon as late this year and completion by 2019. Still, if our regulators want to be seen as more than a convenient rubber stamp for the utility industry, it would be good to see them asking a few more hard questions before letting the digging begin.